

## **ABSTRACT**

### **SOCIAL WORK**

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#### **AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ACADEMIC SELF-CONCEPT ON ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND SELF-ESTEEM AMONG AFRICAN-AMERICAN CHILDREN**

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The purpose of this study was to examine the causal relationship of academic self-concept on academic achievement and self-esteem among African-Americans. The sample for this study consisted of fifty students from a large southern city high school. Their ages ranged from thirteen to fifteen.

A two page questionnaire, consisting of twenty-eight questions were used to elicit student responses. In addition, teacher reports of overall mid-semester grades were used to measure academic achievement. The results were analyzed utilizing frequency, distribution, means, standard deviation, and Pearson's r Correlation Coefficient.

The findings indicated that there was no relationship between academic self-concept and academic achievement. In addition, it showed no relationship between academic self-concept and self-esteem. However, there was a statistically significant relationship between academic achievement and self-esteem.

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ACADEMIC  
SELF-CONCEPT ON ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND SELF-ESTEEM AMONG  
AFRICAN-AMERICAN CHILDREN

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION AND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

There is not one day that passes by without someone making references to America's educational system. American students are constantly compared with students in other countries. Most school social work offices are overflowing with referrals on students who are truant and disruptive in class. These reactions may be a direct result of having a low academic self-concept in which the student is not motivated to succeed academically due to failure anxiety or avoidance. However, for African-American students the comparison to students of an international level are diminutive. African-American students are constantly compared to every ethnic group in the US on matters of academic. In fact, many educators and others have put forth theories that attempt to explain the high under-achievement of African-American children. Students who receive the most scrutiny are those who are labeled as socially and economically disadvantaged.

In an excerpt written in The Condition of Education, a book produced by the U.S. Department of Education, Black children are at an educational disadvantage relative to whites because of several factors like the level of parent education, parent involvement, single parent homes, and income based segregation.<sup>1</sup> A brief look at statistics show that as early as age nine there are differences in academic performances of black and white students. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) which measures academic proficiency in reading, math, and, science show that at age nine black children

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<sup>1</sup>US Dept. of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *The Condition of Education*, 1994. Washington, DC: (1994) 9-14

score lower than whites in these content areas.<sup>2</sup> Although the achievement gap narrowed in the 1970's and the early 1980's it hasn't narrowed significantly since. In fact, in 1992, Black nine year olds were 33 points behind whites in reading compared to whites with 44 points in 1971; 27 points behind whites in math compared to whites with 35 points in 1973; and 39 points behind in science compared to whites with 57 points in 1970.

However, it should not be surprising that so much attention is focused on today's youth, because our future rests in their hands. In fact, if our education system continues on this downward spiral our nation will no longer be looked up as innovators or technology and contributors to scholarly works.

In most educational settings it is a common belief that failures in school result from low self-esteem, but other findings suggest that a student's academic self-concept plays a bigger role in academic achievement. Generally, the term self-concept is defined as a person's total view of him or herself. And one's self-concept is always changing. Often, it is a result of one's life experiences and how they interpret it. In most classrooms students rate their own academic ability and their perception is reinforced by teacher responses and grades, henceforth they develop an academic self-concept of themselves. Whether it is positive or negative.

Developing a positive academic self-concept can help increase one's level of self esteem and academic achievement. Herbert Marsh, a respected researcher on the casual relation between academic self-concept and academic achievement states that many self-

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<sup>2</sup> US Dept. of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, The Condition of Education, 1994. Washington, DC: (1994) 9-14

concept enhancement programs are based on the assumption that an improvement in self-concept will lead to gains in academia.<sup>3</sup> However, many students in an effort to protect their self-esteem attempt to avoid failure by ascribing to a low academic self-concept of themselves as a mechanism for coping with achievement demands.<sup>4</sup> According to Covington and Omelich, failure avoiding techniques may temporarily reduce the negative effect which is associated with feelings of incompetence or humiliation, but later on such tactics eventually cause the same failures that these students are trying to avoid. In other words, these students become convinced of their inability to succeed at a specific task.<sup>5</sup> Although there is a substantial amount of literature on academic self-concept and academic achievement, there is little research that has been focused on African-American students in relation to all three variables. Instead, most of the literature which includes African-Americans as participants, highlight high achievers as abnormal and attribute it to the students attempt to break away from perceived norms.

### SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

As education continues to play an important role in changing or increasing one's socioeconomic level, it is imperative that students obtain a stable and meaningful primary education. In America, one is recognized by their accomplishment and the social status

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<sup>3</sup>Herbert Marsh, Causal Ordering of Academic Self-concept and Academic Achievement: A Multiwave, Longitudinal Panel Analysis. Journal of Education Psychology 82 (1990) : 646-656

<sup>4</sup>Martin Covington and Carol Omelich. Ability and Effort Valuation Among Failure-Avoiding and Failure-accepting Students. Journal of Educational Psychology 77 (1985) : 445-459.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 446.

that they attain. One can only imagine how one's self-esteem can decrease if they do not achieve success in tasks which are deemed appropriate in this particular society.

In many instances, African-Americans continue to lag behind whites with respect to educational access, achievement, and attainment, although there have been some gains over time. However this study will attempt to show a causal relationship between one's academic self-concept, the effect it has on academic achievement, and overall self-esteem. The information brought forth in this study will illuminate existing theories. In addition it will aid social workers who work with teachers, parents, and administrators in an effort to highlight their role in producing healthy young people by emphasizing the importance of allowing outlets for successful achievement.

#### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

This study proposes to focus on African-American students. The major objectives of the study will be: (1) To assess African-American students academic self-concept; (2) to examine the relationship between academic self-concept and the level of achievement attained; and (3) to examine the effect that academic self-concept and achievement has on overall self-esteem. In essence, this study will attempt to show how having a positive academic self-concept transcends to achievement and overall self-esteem regardless of race and other factors.

## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### Academic self-concept and self-esteem.

The relationship between academic self-concept and academic achievement, as well as self-esteem are issues of great debate. In this chapter a comprehensive review of studies which have been examined will be put forth.

Owens, a renowned researcher, examined the relationship between self-esteem and adolescent social problems. The underlying assumption according to Owens is that youths with high self-esteem will behave in more socially acceptable ways than those with reported low self-esteem.<sup>6</sup> Generally youths with high self-esteem will have higher achievement in traditional pursuits and greater socio-emotional well-being. In contrast, low self-esteem may pre-dispose youths to many adolescent problems, since those youths may attempt activities deemed as deviant.

In addition, Owens quotes three key positions concerning self-esteem and academic achievement from previous studies. The first position is high self-esteem promotes high performance. Second, high performance produces self-confidence. Third poor performance produces self-depreciation. In this study, models and data were collected from the Youth in Transition study, a five year longitudinal study, utilized a

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<sup>6</sup>Timothy Owens, "Two Dimensions of Self-esteem: Reciprocal Effects of Positive Self-worth and Self-depreciation on adolescent Problems", American Sociological Review 59 (June 1994) :391-407.

multi-stage sampling design representing 2,213 randomly selected 10th grade high school boys attending 87 public schools in the U.S.

The Rosenberg self-esteem scale was used to measure self-esteem. School grades were measured by self-reports on a single item. Also self-worth variables were measured by self-reports on (1) global self-esteem both positive and negative, (2) self-depreciation, and (3) positive self-worth items. In addition, a single instrument variable used for depression was used. The subjects were to respond to five indicators such as the degree to which one feels the future looks bright. Last, a delinquency variable was measured by six indicators such as a 7 item index of delinquent school behaviors.<sup>7</sup> In conclusion, the study supported the self-consistency theory which states that adolescents with poor self-concepts are more likely to perform poorly at school; however poor performance did not appear to increase their feelings of self-worth. Also, the results between white and African-American students differed. For white students, the effect of grades on self-depreciation remained non-significant while with African-American students grades had a sizable impact on self-depreciation.

Rosenberg, Schoenback, Schooler, and Rosenberg, explored two very different definitions of global self-esteem and specific self-esteem and their relationship to one another. According to the study, the term self-esteem has been loosely used in many studies to explain many social problems, but most of the studies deal with global.<sup>8</sup> Global

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<sup>7</sup> Timothy Owens, "Two Dimensions of Self-esteem: Reciprocal Effects of Positive Self-worth and Self-depreciation on adolescent Problems", American Sociological Review 59 (June 1994) :391-407.

<sup>8</sup> Morris Rosenberg, Carrie Schoenback, Carmen Schooler and Florence Rosenbert, "Global self-esteem and Specific Self-esteem: Different Concepts, Different Outcomes," American Sociological Review 60 (February 1995) :141-156

self-esteem is defined as an individuals overall attitude toward him or herself. While specific self-esteem can be related to a person's confidence level that he/she can achieve certain goals or performance. The authors state:

The study of any attitude and self-esteem is an attitude, must take account of the fact that people may have attitudes both toward an object as a whole (global) and toward specific attitudes both toward and object as a whole (global) and toward specific "facets" of the object. Although the differences between global and specific attitudes are sometimes overlooked, they are not equivalent or interchangeable. Also attitudes include both cognitive are evident in the fact that they refer to objects. They are affective is shown by the that they have direction either positive or negative and intensity.<sup>9</sup>

According to the study it is important to distinguish between global and specific self-esteem especially when self-esteem is treated as a cause or an outcome of a problem. The researcher's hypothesized that specific self-esteem rather than global self-esteem will be a better indicator of a person's overall psychological well-being than specific self-esteem.

Data was drawn from the Youth in Transition study. Global self-esteem was measured by Rosenberg's self-esteem scale. Academic self-esteem (specific self-esteem measure) was based on a 3 item index. School grades served as the behavioral outcome and were based on a self-reported G.P.A.. The findings indicated that global self-esteem was more strongly related to measures of psychological well-being specific (academic) self-esteem is a much better predictor of school performance. Also, global self-esteem and

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<sup>9</sup>Morris Rosenberg, Carrie Schoenback, Carmen Schooler and Florence Rosenbert, "Global self-esteem and Specific Self-esteem: Different Concepts, Different Outcomes," American Sociological Review 60 (February 1995) :141-156



academic achievement affect one another significantly, but self-esteem has a more powerful effect on global self-esteem. In addition, the effect of academic self-esteem on global self-esteem was more than three times greater for those who valued academic performance relatively high. It was only among the high groups that specific academic self-esteem had a greater effect on global self-esteem than the other way around.

Osborne examined theory and disidentification which African-American children detach their self-esteem from academic outcomes thus protecting themselves from failure. Steele explains African-American students poor academic performance and their paradoxically high-esteem as:

Poor performance in school is a threat to personal self-esteem for both African-Americans and whites. However for African-Americans, the poor performance also threatens to confirm regular stereotypes. In order for academic achievement to protect their self-esteem they disidentify with schools. They disengage their self-esteem from how well or poorly they are doing academically.<sup>10</sup>

Osborne tested three indicators of Steel's theory: (1) African-Americans score lower on measures of academic achievement than whites, (2) African-American students tend not to report lower self-esteem, than whites, (3) that correlation's between measures of academic achievements and global self-esteem should be moderate and significant for both whites and African-Americans early in their education, but that over time the correlation should weaken for African-Americans as they disidentify.

Data for this study was drawn from a file for the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS). For this study only data on Black and white students were retrieved for

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<sup>10</sup> Jason Osborne, "Academics, Self-Esteem, and Race: A Look at the underlying Assumptions of the Disidentification Hypothesis," Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin 21 (May 1995) :449-455

analysis. The sample included 544 African-American males, 689 African-American females, 5,294 white males, and 5,472 white females. The following variables were measured: (1) sex of the participants, (2) race of the participant, (3) socioeconomic status, (4) G.P.A., (5) academic achievement, (6) global self-esteem.<sup>11</sup>

The results of the study supported all three indicators of Steele's disidentification theory. However, the only statistically significant change in correlation is for African-American male students correlation between self-esteem and G.P.A.. Also African-American female students showed no difference across time in their correlation between self-esteem and achievement tests. Another finding showed that correlation's between self-esteem and achievement tests were weaker than those of self-esteem and G.P.A.. According to Osborne, this can be attributed to the fact that achievement tests are seldomly given and feedback to the students are limited with a time lag between administration of the test and feedback. This study was limited because it didn't measure academic self-esteem, and good measure of disidentification was not used.

In yet another study, Masqud and Roushani explored the relationship between socioeconomic status, locus of control, self-concept, and academic achievement in secondary schools. Locus of control is defined as the extent to which people believe that responsibility for positive reinforcement belong to themselves (internal) or to others (external).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Jason Osborne, "Academics, Self-Esteem, and Race: A look at the underlying Assumptions of the Disidentification Hypothesis," Personality and social Psychology Bulletin 21 (May 1995): 449-455

<sup>12</sup> Muhammad Maqsud and Sepideh Kouhani "Relationships between Socioeconomic Status, Locus of Control, Self-concept, and Academic Achievement of Botswana Adolescents," Journal of Youth and Adolescence 20 (August 1990) : 107-114

The study used one hundred and thirty-five students (58 boys and 77 girls) in three high schools. The following measures were used: (1) a brief socioeconomic background questionnaire (SBQ); (2) locus of control scale (NCLS); (3) a self concept scale; (4) the participants achievement scores in English and mathematics were used. All in all, the results showed that both males and females adolescents were found to be significantly more externally oriented when compared against other data. Also, socioeconomic status was significantly positively associated with self-concept, and academic achievement.

Atherly also observed the effects of academic achievement and socioeconomic status upon the self-esteem of middle school students. The study was born out of the desire to test out assumptions made by teachers on students with low socioeconomic status. Only three schools with significant differences were chosen. Atherly hypothesized the following: (1) The parents from school c who were from a low social class would score lower on self-concept than the others, (2) pupils from the other school who were academically less able than the pupils from school A would reflect their low ability by scoring lower on self-concept, (3) pupils from the superior ability school C would score significantly higher in both the total mean score and the subscales. In the end, the results showed significant differences between the children of low academic ability and low socioeconomic status in school C and the children of higher ability and higher socioeconomic status in school A and B. However, no support was found for the existence of a positive relationship between academic ability alone and self-esteem between schools, but

strong support was given to the hypothesis which states that children with higher ability will be higher self-esteem.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to the previous studies put forth Mboya's research explored the relationship between self-concept of academic ability and academic achievement and assessed whether they correlated more strongly than the relationship between global self concept and academic achievement among high school students.<sup>14</sup> Alson Mboya sought to confirm the multidimensionality of one's self-concept. Data was collected from a nonrandom sample of 229 tenth grade students (170 males and 59 females) from five high schools. First academic achievement was measured by the California Achievement Test. Second academic self-concept was measured with the self-concept of ability scale (SCAA). Third global concept was measured by the Coopersmith self-esteem scale. The results demonstrated a strong relationship between self-concept of academic ability and academic achievement than did the relationship between global self-concept and academic achievement. Further findings showed that academic self-concept achieved statistical significance with academic achievement when considered in conjunction with the failure of global self-concept to achieve similar results.

On the other hand, some students avoid failure altogether. Covington and Carol Omelich conducted research on the effects of failure avoiding and failure accepting students with the respect to academic achievement. Within this study two major theories

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<sup>13</sup>C.A. Atherly, "The Effects of Academic Achievement and Socioeconomic Status Upon the Self-concept in the Middle Years of School: A Case Study, Educational Research 32 (Winter 1990) :224-229

<sup>14</sup>Mzobansi Mboya, "The Relative Importance of Global Self-concept and Self concept of Academic Ability in Predicting Academic Achievement, Adolescence 93 (Spring 1989) :36-43

were used. The self-worth theory and the attribution theory were used as guidelines in an effort to predict ability and effort valuation among students.<sup>15</sup> The thrust of the study focused on students with a low self-concept of ability and on the distinction between failure avoiding and failure accepting orientations. Data on the reactions of students with high self-concepts were not of great concern on this study. A questionnaire involving a series of four midterm exams were given. Upon completion the students were told their grades. The questionnaire was divided into two sections in an effort to manipulate different levels of perceived ability by informing the students that they either passed or failed three exams indicating high or low ability.<sup>16</sup> In conclusion, reactions to failure in the fourth exam between high ability and low ability groups proved significant. Those who were labeled high ability, perceived failure as less evidence for inability than did low ability. This confirmed the predictions of Covington and Omelich. Those with a history of successful achievement are more likely to interpret a single failure in nonability terms than persons for a given failure in only one of many. This study demonstrated how tendencies of individuals with low self-concept individuals depend on their certainty about their ability status.

Marsh has also contributed to the number of studies on this issue by examining the internal structure of self-concept in an effort to illustrate the difference between academic self-concept and non-academic components of self-concept.<sup>17</sup> Marsh attempts to build

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<sup>15</sup>Martin Covington and Carol Omelich. "Ability and Effort Valuation Among Failure Avoiding and Failure Accepting Students" Journal of Educational Psychology 77 (1985) :446-459

<sup>16</sup> Martin Covington and Carol Omelich, "Ability and Effort Valuation Among Failure Avoiding and Failure Accepting Students." Journal of Educational Psychology 77 (1985): 446-459

upon earlier findings in which he identified 14 components of academic self-concept corresponding to core school subjects such as english, math, and noncore subjects such as art and music. Marsh hypothesized that academic achievement in each subject would correlate more highly with the corresponding academic self-concept scale. For example, grades in math should correlate highly with math self-concept. Data was collected from 507 boys in grades 7-10. The students completed the Academic self-description Questionnaire (ASDQII). The ASDQII corresponded to courses actually taken by the students. The first nine subjects were designated as core academic subjects. The results provided strong support for content specificity of academic self-concepts and their relation to academic achievement.

#### ACADEMIC SELF-CONCEPT AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

In another study, Marsh attempted to identify a causal ordering of academic self-concept and achievement. The importance of this study centers around the assumption that improvement in self-concept will lead to gains in academic achievement.<sup>17</sup> Information was obtained in the 10th, 11th, and 12th grade and one year after graduation from the participants in the Youth in Transition study. Academic ability was derived from scores on four standardized tests. Next, academic self-concept was inferred from responses to three self-rating items: School ability, perception of intelligence, and reading.

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<sup>17</sup>Herbert Marsh, "Content Specificity of Relations between Academic Achievement and Academic Self-concept," Journal of Educational Psychology 84 (1992) : 35-42

<sup>18</sup>Herbert Marsh, "Casual Ordering of Academic self-concept and Academic Achievement: A Multiwave, Longitudinal Panel Analysis," Journal of Educational Psychology 82 (1990) :646-656

the reported grade average in grades 11 and 12 were significantly affected by academic self-concept measured the previous year, whereas prior reported grades had no effect on the measures of academic self-concept. The results proved that prior academic self-concept influences academic achievement.<sup>19</sup>

Skoalvik and Hagtvvet also proposed their theory on the causal relationships among academic achievement, self concept of ability, and general self-esteem.<sup>20</sup> Data was collected from 635 students twice. Once while the students were in the 3rd grade and another in the 4th grade. Also data from other students were collected once in the 6th grade and another in the 7th grade. In this study, global self-esteem was defined as an individuals general self-acceptance or their general positive or negative attitudes toward themselves. Measuring instruments used were Rosenberg's self-esteem scale and self-concept of ability was measured by a 7 item an academic self-esteem scale. The teachers ranked the students from high to low achievers in class order to compare self-concept to achievement.<sup>21</sup> The findings showed that in one group there seemed to have causal predominance over self-concept of ability. Also the idea of causality from academic achievement to global self-esteem via self-concept of ability was supported.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Herbert Marsh "Casual ordering of Academic self-concept and academic Achievement: A multiwave, longitudinal Panel Analysis," Journal of Educational Psychology 82 (1990): 646-656

<sup>20</sup>Einar Skoalvik and Knut Hagtvvet, "Academic Achievement and Self-Concept: An analysis of Causal Predominance in a Developmental Perspective." Personality and Social Psychology 58 (1990) :292-301.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 294.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 300.

Helmke and van Aken who conducted a similar study proposed the following questions in their work: (1) Do self-concept and achievement influence each other; and (2) does it make a difference whether achievement is assessed by marks or by test. The research used a mathematics test to measure ability. Marks or grades at the end of the year were used to measure achievement. The results show that it makes a difference whether achievement is measured with only one indicator (either mark or test performance). Because the study was on elementary school children, the consequences of achievement related success or failure it doesn't have a permanent effect on later achievement.<sup>23</sup>

Shavelson and Bolus tested the multidimensionality of the term self-concept. The study sought to show the causal predominance of self-concept, achievement, and to demonstrate how the analysis of covariance structures can simultaneously examine measurement, structural, and theoretical concerns.<sup>24</sup> A sample of 99 students were used. The students were administered a battery of self-concept instruments by one of the authors during an initial collection. Later a second collection was carried out.

Self-concept was measured by the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale. Also, the Michigan State Self-Concept Of Ability Scale was used to measure academic self-concept. Upon conclusion of the study, it appeared that self-concept was causally predominant over achievement.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Andreas Helmke and Marcel van Aken. "The Causal Ordering of Academic Achievement and Self-concept of Ability during Elementary School: A longitudinal Study. Journal of Educational Psychology 87 (1995) :624-627

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 625.



Arroyo and Zigler examined the relation between racial identify and personal psychological functioning within the framework of racelessness. These researchers proposed that academically successful African American students achieve their success by adopting behaviors and attitudes that distance themselves from their culture of origin. Resulting in increased feelings of anxiety. School failures may be interpreted differently by African American students as they attempt to form a personal identification. By failing to succeed in school, African American children demonstrate their disinstinctiveness from and opposition to whites.<sup>26</sup> According to some scholars, African American students who assume a raceless persona experience a great deal of interpersonal conflict and ambivalence due to the demands of the school environment and those of their own culture. However, the results show that behaviors and attitudes described are common to all high achieving adolescents and not specific to African Americans.

Liu, Kaplan, and Riser used a cross-sectional study and examined the reciprocal relationships between academic achievement and general self-esteem by specifying theoretically indicated variables in each of the relationships.<sup>27</sup> The researchers asked the question: Are the relationships between academic achievement and general self-esteem reciprocal? The researchers proposed five variables -- deviance, motivation, psychological distress, illness, and absence as issues that mediate the causal effect from general self

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<sup>25</sup>Richard Shavelson and Roger Bolus. "Self Concept: The Interplay of Theory and Methods," Journal of Educational Psychology 74 (1982) :3-17

<sup>26</sup>Richard Shavelson and Roger Bolus. "Self-Concept: The Interplay of Theory and Methods," Journal of Educational Psychology 74 (1982): 3-17

<sup>27</sup>Xiaoru, Liu, Howard Kaplan, and Will Riser, "Decomposing the Reciprocal Relationships between Academic Achievement and General Self-esteem." Youth and Society 24 (December 1992) :123-148

esteem to academic achievement. General self-esteem is supposed to affect academic achievement via its effects on motivation to succeed and absences from school, both of which affect academic achievement directly. Self-esteem affects motivation to succeed by its effects on deviance and psychological distress, which directly affect motivation. Self-esteem affects absences by its effects on deviance and psychological distress, both of which effect illness, a precursor to absences.<sup>28</sup>

The data on which these analysis were collected from students in grades 7-12 in private, independent co-educational preparatory school. A 419 item self-administered questionnaire was distributed to all students on the same day. The following variables were tested: (1) Academic achievement, (2) perception of teacher's responses, (3) academic self-concept, (4) general self-esteem, (5) deviance, (6) motivation, (7) psychological distress, (8) illness, and, (9) total absences from school. The results of the study confirm that general self-esteem both influences and is influenced by academic achievement and academic self-concept.<sup>29</sup>

In another study on the relation between academic self-concept and academic achievement. Mboya reviewed 211 10th graders in five public schools. Like many other studies he measured global self-concept by using the Coppersmith Self-esteem inventory. However, in his study he found no significant relationship between global self-concept and academic achievement.<sup>30</sup> Mboya stated that African-Americans sometimes separate their

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<sup>28</sup>Xiaoru, Liu, Howard Kaplan and Will Riser, "Decomposing the Reciprocal Relationships between Academic Achievement and General Self Esteem." Youth and Society 24 (December 1992): 123-148

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 146

personal selves and school orientation. According to the study African-American students realize the uselessness of pairing their feelings about themselves with their school performance. Further results imply that there was a significant positive relationship when academic achievement was compared with the notion of “self-concept of academic ability”. Mboya concluded that academic self-concept is extremely important and plays a crucial role in academic achievement among African-Americans.<sup>31</sup>

In addition, J. Daniel House examined the relationship between achievement-related expectancies, academic self-concept, and mathematics performance of academically underprepared adolescent students. The study also emphasized gender and ethnic considerations. The subjects in this study were a sample of 191 students studying at a large public university there were 124 African-Americans and 67 white students. The students were selected because they were admitted to college through special admissions and academic service programs for academically underprepared students.<sup>32</sup> The students in the study attended inner-city high schools in the past.

Academic self-concept was measured with self-reports by the students of their academic ability, and mathematical ability and drive to achieve., Academic self-concept scores was divided in half to define students as low or high in academic self-concept.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>M. Mboya. “Black Adolescents: A Descriptive study of Their Self-concepts and Academic Achievements.” *Adolescence* (21) 1986:689-695.

<sup>31</sup>M. Mboya. “Black Adolescents: A Descriptive Study of their Self-Concepts and Academic Achievement.” *Adolescence* (21) 1986: 689-695

<sup>32</sup>J. Daniel House. “Achievement related Expectancies, Academic self-concept and Mathematics Performance of Academically Underprepared Adolescent Students.” *The Journal of Genetic Psychology* 54 (1992): 61-71

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 64

Achievement-related expectancy was measured with the sum of students self-ratings of their expectations for making at least a B average in college and graduating with honors. Students indicated their probability of achievement.<sup>34</sup>

The findings demonstrated (or indicated) that academic self-concept is significantly related to mathematics performance of academically underprepared older adolescent students whereas achievement related expectancies are not. An explanation for the results is that the academically underprepared students in this study may have had unrealistic expectations of their achievement.<sup>35</sup> A second finding showed a significant difference between male and female students in mathematics performance. However unlike many other studies females earned higher scores than males. Also, there were no significant racial differences in mathematical performances. The findings indicate that racial and gender differences may have been explained by prior schooling and the effects or prior academic achievement.<sup>36</sup>

Bachman and O'Malley examined the ways in which students self-concepts of academic ability are related and influenced by achievement level. In addition, the study attempts to show whether school mean ability levels show a clear impact on long-term educational attainment. The researchers tested four predictions. The first prediction made was that there would be a positive correlation between school mean ability and individual

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<sup>34</sup>J. Daniel Hous: "Achievement Related Expectancies, Academic Self-concept and Mathematics Performance of Academically Underprepared Adolescent Students." *The Journal of Genetic Psychology* 54 (1992): 61-71

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 67

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 67

self-concepts. (If one assumes that outside factors play an important role outside the school in forming these concepts).<sup>37</sup> The second prediction was if individual ability was controlled then the relationship between school mean ability and individual self-concepts should be negative. (If one assumes that within- school comparisons play a role on self-concepts). The third prediction as noted before states that if self-concept is linked to self-esteem then academic self-concept should impact self-esteem rather than the other way around.<sup>38</sup> Lastly the fourth prediction stated that school mean ability will show no direct or indirect effect on long-term educational attainment. Data was collected from the youth in transition study. The following measures were used. (1) socioeconomic status, (2) academic ability, (3) academic performance (grades), (4) self-concept of academic ability, (5) self-esteem, (6) educational attainment and (7) measures of school characteristics. The results of the study show that after the effects of individual ability and family socioeconomic were controlled for there were only small negative effects of school mean ability on self-concepts and self-esteem. Educational attainment 5 years beyond high school was strongly influenced by background, ability, and grades, but there was little additional impact from self-concepts and self-esteem, and no overall effect attributable to school climate.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>Jerald Bachman and Patrick O'Malley. "Self-concepts, Self-esteem, and Educational Experiences: The Frog Pond Revisited (Again)." Journal of Personality and Social Psychology (50) 1986:35-46.

<sup>38</sup>Jerald Bachman and Patrick O'Malley. "Self-concepts, Self-Esteem, and Educational Experiences: The Frog Pond Revisited (Again)." Journal of Personality and Social Psychology (50) 1986: 35-46

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 45

In a replication, Kelly and Jordan re-examined the effects of academic achievement and gender on academic and social self-concept. the students were categorized as highly gifted (hg), moderately gifted (mg), and average (avg) and were selected to represent every level of achievement and socioeconomic level.<sup>40</sup> The first hypothesis stated that academic achievement would have a positive effect on academic self-concept measures. Hg and Mg were expected to have a more positive academic self-concept than Avg students. Gender and academic achievement would not be considered for academic self-concept. The second hypothesis stated that there would be an interaction of achievement and gender for social self-concept. Hg and Mg boys were expected to have more positive social self-concepts than Avg boys. No differences were anticipated in the social self-concepts of Hg, Mg, and Avg girls.<sup>41</sup> Students from three junior high schools with specific academic programs were used. One school served an upper middle class, another school served as a blue collar class, and a metropolitan school served as the economically disadvantaged population. The participants most recent achievement scores were used to form the Hg, Mg, and Avg groups.

The measures used were the Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents which yields scores reflecting self-concept in eight areas of functioning; social acceptance, close friendships, romantic appeal. The Me scale measures academic self-concept. All in all the results of the study substantiate the first hypothesis. The Hg group was higher in

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<sup>40</sup>Kevin R. Kelly and Laverne K. Jordon. "Effects of Academic Achievement and Gender of Academic and Social Self-concepts: A Replication Study." Journal of Counseling and Development (69) 1990:173-177

<sup>41</sup>Ibid

scholastic competence than the Mg and Avg groups. The Mg students were in turn higher than Avg students on this variable. The level of academic self-concept seemed to match the level of academic achievement. Also contrary to expectations, there was an interaction of gender and academic achievement on the Me scale.<sup>42</sup> The Hg boys scored higher than Mg and Avg boys and Avg girls on this index of academic self-concept. The Hg and Mg girls and the Mg and Avg boys all scored higher on the Me scale than the Avg girls. However, the second hypothesis was not supported. The findings with respect to social self-concept showed that gifted boys did not have more positive social self-concepts than boys who were average academic achievers.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

There are many theories that have been put forth in an attempt to explain the relationship among academic self-concept, academic achievement, and self-esteem. However only two theories in this study will serve as models. The theories are the Attribution Theory and the Self-Worth Theory.

Attributions refer to people's interpretation of an experience. In relation to achievement, the attribution theory helps us to understand how students explain their successes or failures. In addition, the attribution theory states that people use one of these seven forms of explanations for their success or failure: ability, effort, mood, difficulty of task, teacher bias, luck or chance, and unusual help from others.<sup>43</sup> If students fail a test,

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<sup>42</sup>Kevin R. Kelly and Laverne K. Jordon. "Effects of Academic Achievement and Gender of Academic and Social Self-Concepts: A Replication Study." Journal of Counseling and Development (69) 1990: 173-177

<sup>43</sup>John H. Bruning, ed. Educational Psychology (Boston: Little Brown and Company), 1987, 320.

they may explain their failure on: (1) Not studying (lack of effort), (2) The hard test (difficulty of task), (3) Feeling emotionally drained (mood), (4) Studying the wrong thing (luck or chance), (5) Capricious teacher behavior (teacher bias), (6) Personal shortcomings (ability), or (7) Unusual help from others is made when an unexpectedly good performance occurs.<sup>44</sup> In addition some students in an effort to protect their self-worth and uncertainty about their ability ascribe to a failure avoiding strategy.<sup>45</sup> They believe that if they can't avoid failure then they can avoid the implied projection of failure by not trying.<sup>46</sup> Achievement motivation is seldom internal factors such as approval and praise for their motivation.

On the other hand, success seekers are those who have had a history of high achievement in school. Generally speaking they are self-confident and strongly motivated. It is their success that reinforces their ideas about their abilities. Failure is rarely taken as an indication of lack of ability.<sup>47</sup>

The second theory, the Self-Worth Theory states that in certain situations students gain by not trying or withholding effort. It also states that one way to avoid threats to self-esteem is to withhold effort.<sup>48</sup> Withholding effort allows failure to be attributed to

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<sup>44</sup>John H. Bruning, ed. Educational Psychology (Boston: Little Brown and Company), 1987, 320.

<sup>45</sup>Martin Covington and Carol Omelich, "Ability and Effort Valuation among Failure Avoiding and Failure Accepting Students." Journal of Educational Psychology 77 (1985): 446-459

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 448.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 449.

<sup>48</sup>Ted Thompson, John Davidson, and James Barber, Self-worth Protection in Achievement Motivation: Performance Effects and Attributional Behavior. Journal of Educational Psychology 87 (1995): 598-610.



lack of effort and not ability therefore protecting self-esteem. The self-worth theory is based on three assumptions. This first assumption states that self-worth protective students will show different levels of performance in situations in which poor performance can be attributed to low ability than they will show in situations in which poor performance can be correlated to some other reason. However when excuses allow factors unrelated to ability to prevail, a feeling of low intellect is created. The second assumption states that poor performances of a self-worth protective student in situations of high intellectual evaluative threat is associated with a tendency to discount personal responsibility for failure.<sup>49</sup> A third assumption made by the self-worth theory is threats of high intellectual evaluative efforts are not gender specific. All in all the self-worth model and attributional model and their respective theories reflect two different methods of coping with failure by either avoiding it or accepting it.<sup>50</sup>

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESIS

If having a positive self-concept is a desirable trait in educational settings and is frequently delineated as a mediating variable that facilitates the attainment of other desirable outcomes then it ought to produce successful academic achievement.<sup>51</sup> As one successfully achieves at tasks then these successes should reinforce the students ideas

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<sup>49</sup>Ted Thompson, John Davidson, and James Barber, "Self-worth Protection in Achievement Motivation: Performance Effects and Attributional Behavior." Journal of Educational Psychology 87 (1995): 598-610

<sup>50</sup>Ibid

<sup>51</sup>Ibid

about their ability.<sup>52</sup> So the research question becomes, is there a significant relationship between academic self-concept and academic achievement. The hypothesis is stated as:

H1: There will be a significant relationship between academic self-concept and academic achievement.

In addition, the self-worth theory with its emphasis on a sense of competency as the major source of self-regard focuses on the negative affective consequences of perceptions of incompetence or humiliation.<sup>53</sup> If this is an accurate perception of this theory then there should be a natural succession of academic self concept, achievement and positive self-esteem. Henceforth the research question becomes there will be a significant relationship between academic self-concept and self-esteem. The hypothesis is thus stated as:

H2: There will be a significant relationship between academic self-concept and self-esteem.

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<sup>52</sup>John Glover and Roser Bruning, ed. Educational Psychology (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1987,320.

<sup>53</sup>Martin Covington and Carol Omelich. "Ability and Effort Valuation Among Failure Avoiding and Failure Accepting Students. "Journal of Educational Psychology 77 (1985): 446-459

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Design and Sample**

The subjects in this study was drawn from a group of 9th grade students from a large southern city. Data was collected by administering a two page questionnaire to the group of the students at school. The test was administered by one social work intern and one undergraduate assistant. All respondents were African-American. There was a total of 50 students (30 girls and 20 boys) and their ages ranged from 13 to 15 years of age. The method of sampling used was non-probability. Sampling this method was chosen because the closest and most available subjects were included in the sample.

#### **Measures**

Self-reports were used to elicit responses from the subjects. A modified version of the Self-esteem Index written by Linda Brown and Jacquelyn Alexander was used. The SEI is a norm referenced, self-report instrument designed to elicit children's perceptions of their personal traits and characteristics. The respondent reads each item of the SEI and uses a modified likert-type scale to classify each item as "always true", "usually true", "usually false", and "always false". Four scales make-up the SEI, but for this study only modified versions of two were used. The two scales used to measure each variable were:

#### **Perception of Academic Competence Scale**

The Perception of Academic Competence Scale is a measure of the way that individual perceive themselves in academic and intellectual pursuits. The items on this scale are concerned with individual perceptions: (a) their school performance; (b) their

interest in and desire to excel and academic activities; (c) the interest and support available from teachers; (d) the value that they attach to intellectual achievement (pride or shame); and (e) the affective qualities associated with achievement (fun or boring).

#### **PERCEPTION OF SELF-ESTEEM/PERSONAL SECURITY SCALE**

Perception of personal security measures individuals perceptions of their physical and psychological well-being. The items of this scale are concerned with individual perceptions of (a) their general health and physical condition; (b) guilt or shame over transgressions; (c) overall feelings of personal vulnerability; (d) ability to regress developmentally; and (e) fears, conduct, or temperament.

#### **Academic Achievement**

Academic achievement will be measured by teacher reports. The students will be categorized according to their grades. High achievers were those who receive A's and B's. Average achievers were those who received C's. Low achievers were those who received D's and F's. The students achievement level was based on their mid-semester's overall letter grade.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### FINDINGS

This chapter will summarize the data collected from the participants of the study. Table 1 represents frequencies and percentages of data from the academic self concept, academic achievement, and self-esteem scales. Table 2 represents bivariate correlation's of the study's variables. The alpha level was set at .05 to determine whether to reject or accept the study hypothesis.

There were a total of fifty respondents in this study. Thirty of the respondents were female and twenty of the respondents were male. All of the respondents were African-American. Ages of the respondents ranged from thirteen to fifteen.

Findings from the frequency distribution indicate a mean score of 37.5 for academic self-concepts. The distribution for academic self-concept is negatively skewed. Which means a majority of the respondents had high levels of academic self-concept. The standard deviation for this variable was 8.9. Forty-six percent of the respondents had "low" levels of academic self-concept. Forty-two percent of the respondents "moderate" levels of academic self-concept, while twelve percent had "high" levels of academic self-concept.

Further findings from the frequency distribution show that self-esteem is negatively skewed which means a majority of the majority of the respondents had high levels of self-esteem. The mean score for self-esteem was 40.9 and the standard deviation score was 8.9. Only four percent of the respondents had "low" levels of self-esteem. Twenty

percent of the respondents had moderate” levels of self-esteem. While twenty-six percent had “high” levels of self-esteem.

Lastly, findings from the frequency distribution indicate a mean score of 1.9 for academic achievement. The findings were slightly positively skewed, which means the majority of students had slightly lower levels of academic achievement. The standard deviation for this variable was .7. Twenty-eight percent of the respondents had “high” levels of achievement. Fifty percent of the respondents had “average” levels of achievement, while twenty-two percent had “low” levels of achievement scores.

TABLE 1: FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTION OF STUDY VARIABLES

VARIABLE	FREQUENCY	PERCENT
<b>ACADEMIC SELF-CONCEPT<sup>a</sup></b>		
low	23	46
medium	21	42
high	06	12
<b>ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT<sup>b</sup></b>		
low	14	28
medium	25	50
high	11	22
<b>SELF-ESTEEM<sup>c</sup></b>		
low	04	08
medium	20	40
high	26	52

a. mean = 37.5  
standard deviation = 8.9

b. mean = 40.9  
standard deviation = 8.0

c. mean = 1.9  
standard deviation = .7

## BIVARIATE CORRELATION'S OF THE STUDY'S VARIABLES

Hypothesis 1 stated that there will be a significant relationship between academic self-concept and academic achievement. The analysis of this relationship between academic self-concept and academic achievement reveals that there is no relationship between academic self-concept and academic achievement ( $r=.1237$  and  $p=.392$ ). As academic self-concept increases or decreases achievement scores do not have a positive or negative effect. Therefore, hypothesis 1 is rejected and the null hypothesis was accepted. There was no significant relationship between academic self-concept & self-esteem.

Hypothesis 2 stated that there will be a significant relationship between academic self-concept and self-esteem. The analysis of this relationship between academic self-concept and self-esteem reveals that there was no relationship between academic self-concept and self-esteem ( $r=.2949$  and  $p=.038$ ). As academic self-concept increases or decreases, scores of self-esteem are not effected positively or negatively. Therefore hypothesis 2 is also rejected and the null hypothesis is accepted. There was no significant relationship between academic self-concept and self-esteem.



**TABLE 2: BIVARIATE CORRELATIONS OF STUDY VARIABLES  
(N = 50)**

	<b>ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT</b>	<b>SELF-ESTEEM</b>
<b>ACADEMIC SELF CONCEPT</b>	<b>r = -.1237</b>	<b>r = .2949</b>
	<b>p = .392</b>	<b>p = .038</b>

**p = .05**

## CHAPTER FIVE

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The scope of this study has been to fill a gap with regard to the issue of the causal ordering of academic self-concept and achievement and the ultimate effect on general self-esteem.

It was found that there is no relationship between academic self-concept, self-esteem, and academic achievement among African-American students. Given the importance of this study and its implications this issue extensive and longitudinal study. If a persons self-esteem and self-concept is always changing then this means that they can be manipulated. Henceforth higher levels of academic self concept can be developed or achieved through school programs or curriculum changes.

In the literature review, some researchers believed that African-American students in essence have two views of themselves an academic view and a social view. This may be a valid point in light of this study's results. One possible explanation is that some African-American students may define general self-esteem and academic self-esteem differently or may not connect them together. Could this be a coping strategy put forth by some students in an effort to assimilate in a biased educational system. Could it be that the more economically disadvantaged a student the more the student beocmes less focused or concerned on academia and more focused on fulfilling basis needs. Very few studies will attempt to question these ideas. If they did then the thrust of the american educational system could be questioned. Is it a system that takes in account all aspects of diversity

and multiculturalism as it claims or is it a system that is only interested in producing mass quantities of similar scores on achievement and norm-referenced tests?

Although the study did prove the hypothesis to be incorrect. The findings did show a statistical significant relationship between academic achievement and self-esteem. The data showed an increase in self-esteem with increased academic achievement or grades. As discussed in the literature a number of studies are consistent with these findings.

#### **IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE**

As society become more competitive and jobs become increasing specialized. It is important that all students are given an equal chance of becoming success. Also as long as Black students continue to drop out of school at disproportionate rates when compared to white students, the economic gap between the two will continue to widen. In many school districts school social workers are not utilized to their fullest capacity. Instead schools use social workers for trivial matters which could easily be taken care of by the teacher. Traditionally, schools think of homework, or a simple phone call home as an intervention to academic problems. Instead schools should have more group counseling facilitated by social workers. Sometimes achievement related problems are related to school based issues such as a poor relationship with the teacher. On the other hand it could be related to home based issues such as a lack of parental involvement. Because school social workers facilitate home-school communication they are placed in a unique position.

However, one can not totally depend on the social worker to change every outcome. The teacher and the school system must be held accountable for the role that they play in their student's education. Often times many schools within the same district do not have the same materials or instructional aides as others. Some say its racism while others say it's a matter of economics and

what some citizens are willing to give back to the schools. It's time to lobby for effective public schools that can be compared to the most prestigious private schools. Future researches should look at these issues, especially when comparing data from one group of students to another.

## APPENDIX A

### A. GENERALIZED ACADEMIC COMPETENCE/SELF-CONCEPT QUESTIONNAIRE

The following questions are designed to measure academic competence or self-concept. It is not a test, so there are no right or wrong answers. Choose the best response that applies to you.

1. I am a hardy and steady worker at school.  

4	3	2	1
always true	usually true	usually false	always false
2. I am good at school work.  

4	3	2	1
always true	usually true	usually false	always false
3. I am pretty good about doing my homework on time.  

4	3	2	1
always true	usually true	usually false	always false
4. I'm proud of my school work.  

4	3	2	1
always true	usually true	usually false	always false
5. I like going to school.  

4	3	2	1
always true	usually true	usually false	always false
6. My teachers like me.  

4	3	2	1
always true	usually true	usually false	always false
7. I give the teachers a lot of trouble at school.  

4	3	2	1
always true	usually true	usually false	always false
8. My parents are disappointed in school grades.  

4	3	2	1
always true	usually true	usually false	always false
9. I do as little work at school as I can get by with.  

4	3	2	1
always true	usually true	usually false	always false

10. School work isn't very interesting.  
4 3 2 1  
always true usually true usually false always false
11. I am slow when it comes to doing my school work.  
4 3 2 1  
always true usually true usually false always false
12. I find it hard to work in classrooms that have a lot of rules.  
4 3 2 1  
always true usually true usually false always false
13. I'm not doing well in school as I'd like to.  
4 3 2 1  
always true usually true usually false always false
14. My teacher's make me feel like I'm not good enough.  
4 3 2 1  
always true usually true usually false always false

**APPENDIX B**  
**A GENERALIZED PERSONAL SECURITY/SELF-ESTEEM QUESTIONNAIRE**

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Answer each question by placing any one number that applies to you.

1=ALWAYS TRUE

2=USUALLY TRUE

3=USUALLY FALSE

4=ALWAYS FALSE

1.     \_\_\_ Kids pick on me a lot.
2.     \_\_\_ I have nightmares almost every night.
3.     \_\_\_ I often feel ashamed of myself.
4.     \_\_\_ My friends don't have much confidence in me.
5.     \_\_\_ I exaggerate my troubles in order to get attention from others.
6.     \_\_\_ I never feel like I'm part of the group.
7.     \_\_\_ It takes me a long time to get used to new things.
8.     \_\_\_ I'm usually the last one to be chosen for games.
9.     \_\_\_ I am often afraid.
10.    \_\_\_ My friends let me take the blame for things they have done.
11.    \_\_\_ I cry often.
12.    \_\_\_ I would rather be with younger kids.
13.    \_\_\_ I am a klutz.
14.    \_\_\_ I spend too much time alone.

## **APPENDIX C**

**Hello my name is Tiffany Chevalier. I am a graduate student at Clark-Atlanta University and also a social work intern at a middle school in Atlanta, Georgia. I am writing a paper on the effects of academic self-concept on self-esteem and academic achievement.**

**In order for my paper to be accurate I need your help. Attached to this letter is a survey which elicits responses in an effort to determine your academic self-concept, self-esteem, and academic achievement. There are no right or wrong answers, so you may feel free to answer all items.**

**It is important that you know that your participation is strictly voluntary. Your names will not be used nor will your school's name or school system.**

**Thank you for your participation,**

**Tiffany Chevalier  
Clark-Atlanta University  
School of Social Work  
James P. Brawley Drive at  
Fair Street, S.W.**



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